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UNCLAS HELSINKI 000016

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [FI](#)

SUBJECT: HALONEN PRESSES TOWARD A FIRST ROUND VICTORY

REF: A. 2005 HELSINKI 1296

[B. HELSINKI 8](#)

[¶1.](#) (U) Summary: If the most recent polls are true and if voter turnout among women is as high as expected, Tarja Halonen will become the first Finnish presidential candidate in history to win election in the first round. End Summary.

[¶2.](#) (U) The first round of Finland's presidential election will take place on January 15, and the two most recent polls have renewed the Social Democratic Party's (SDP) hopes that its candidate, incumbent President Tarja Halonen, will win an outright majority. When elected in 2000, Halonen became the first Finnish woman to win the presidency, and she now looks to make history again by becoming the first candidate to win in the first round. Halonen's support had dipped in early December to 52 percent, according to Finland-Gallup, causing many in her party to predict that a second round was likely (ref A). However, a December 31 Finland-Gallup poll showed Halonen regaining momentum at 54 percent, with her biggest rivals, Center Party (CEN) candidate and current Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen and Conservative (CONS) candidate Sauli Niinisto polling only 18 and 20 percent, respectively. A second poll conducted by Turun Sanomat (the city of Turku's respected daily newspaper) showed Halonen winning 56 percent, Niinisto 20 percent, and Vanhanen 16 percent. The same polls predicted that 63-64 percent of women would vote for Halonen, along with 46-48 percent of men.

[¶3.](#) (U) Despite Halonen's apparent resurgence, pundits from all quarters have long cautioned that a round one victory depends on high turnout, especially from women. SDP activists have worked hard to get out the vote, and Halonen has taken to closing most of her public appearances by simply emphasizing the importance of voting, regardless of whom one supports. Cautious SDP strategists point out that when Halonen won in 2000, prominent female politicians from all parties publicly broke ranks and urged women to go to the polls and elect Finland's first female president; this phenomenon has not occurred in 2006, forcing the SDP to do the legwork itself.

[¶4.](#) (U) And at this early stage, the SDP's efforts appear to be paying off. According to the same Turun Sanomat poll, some 88 percent of Finnish voters intend to vote in the first round; that figure is not unheard of, but by historical standards it is still considered quite high. In practice, prediction for a high turnout already shows signs of proving accurate. On January 4, a handful of selected polling stations opened nationwide for early voting, as occurs during all national elections. Turnout was, indeed, particularly high, with more than 250,000 voters -- better than 6 percent of the electorate -- casting ballots on the first day. According to a Ministry of Justice press release, this represents a new record. Early polls close on January 10, and the bulk of voting will occur on January 15. Should current trends continue, a first round win for Halonen now appears likely.

[¶5.](#) (SBU) Comment: Symbolism aside, the local excitement over a potential first round win really means little, given the fact that all polls show Halonen handily defeating either Niinisto or Vanhanen (by margins of greater than 20 percentage points) should a second round become necessary. In addition, public support for Halonen is clearly personal, not party-based; support for the SDP as a whole has not risen measurably, and the party is unlikely to gain any special benefits from Halonen's coattails in the March 2007 parliamentary contests. As for US interests, the president's re-election also will result in few, if any, changes. Finland under Halonen will remain a largely cooperative and reliable partner on most issues of importance to us; Halonen has emphasized during the campaign the importance of good relations with the US (albeit partly in response to local criticisms of her handling of those relations during her first term - see ref B). Her victory, be it in the first or second round, should do nothing to diminish the generally very positive tenor of the bilateral relationship. End Comment.

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